

Findings

Findings Brief

External Review of the Economy and Environment Program for South East Asia

This findings brief is based on the report, “Evaluation of Economy and Environment Program for Southeast Asia (EEPSEA), January 1, 2005 to June 30, 2008” by Jeffrey R. Vincent, November 7, 2008. The full report is available from IDRC’s Evaluation Unit.

The objectives of the external review of the Economy and Environment Program for Southeast Asia (EEPSEA) were to assess the extent to which the EEPSEA Program is meeting its objectives, assess its risk identification process and mitigation strategies, and evaluate the results of the program.

1. Program Aims

EEPSEA was established in 1993. It aims to develop the capacity of researchers to apply economic concepts and methods to environmental policy issues. It focuses on building the capacity of individual researchers and, through them, the capacity of the organizations for which they work. It does so through research grants and training courses.

EEPSEA’s grants are awarded through a competitive process. It accepts proposals on a wide range of environmental issues (e.g, pollution, forests, coastal resources, economy-wide issues) and lets applicants decide on specific topics. It provides intensive advising during the 12-18 month project cycle. Biannual workshops are the focal point of the project cycle. They include preparatory sessions where researchers receive advice on their presentations of proposals and progress reports; working group sessions where they present this material and receive feedback from advisors and peers; one-on-one sessions where they receive guidance on responding to the feedback; and plenary talks on topical research and policy issues. EEPSEA has a publication series for disseminating research results to academic and policy audiences but encourages researchers to publish in external outlets.

EEPSEA also offers small research grant competitions tied to training courses in specific countries, and it has funded case studies on climate-change adaptation. The total number of projects supported during 2005-8 was 71, with 51 supported by regular research grants. Its program budget from July 2005 til June 2008 was \$4.5 million.

2. Review Methodology

This external review was conducted by Prof. Jeffrey R. Vincent. Prof. Vincent also conducted the previous external review of EEPSEA (2000-4).

Professor Vincent gathered information for this evaluation from various sources: an extensive review of documents, including in-depth examination of 7 randomly selected projects and a cross-country project; interviews and observations at the May 2008 biannual workshop, and telephone interviews after the workshop; an e-mail survey of researchers who started projects after 2004 and completed them before 2008; and much e-mail and telephone communication with the secretariat. Interviews were conducted with current and past researchers, resource persons, stakeholders from the policy community and partner organizations, and the secretariat.

3. Review Findings

EEPSEA made strong progress toward achieving its objectives. Highlights include:

- rapid **localization of capacity building**, including advising on projects and teaching of courses;
- **increased programming in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Vietnam**, with a positive impact on the profile of EEPSEA and environmental economics in general;
- **improved quality of research**, as indicated by increased numbers of publications that appeared in peer-reviewed journals, made methodological innovations, or contributed to international debates on important academic or policy issues;
- **increased influence on policy**, including several instances of impacts on policy regimes, and increased efforts to stimulate demand by policymakers for environmental economics analysis;
- **development and successful delivery of new courses** on specialized topics that were aimed at different audiences, including non-research audiences; and
- **increased number of cross-country activities**, including on leading global issues such as climate change and biodiversity conservation, and **increased number of publications that distilled regionally relevant lessons**, including for policymakers and practitioners.

3.1 Localizing capacity building

Although foreign resource persons remained responsible for advising regular research projects (and appropriately so, given their expertise), EEPSEA's progress toward localizing capacity building was evident in many ways:

- In 2005, EEPSEA had a full-time directory and deputy director. In 2007, this changed to having a full-time researcher from the Philippines as director, and three part-time senior economist positions staffed by EEPSEA alumni (former grantees) in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand.
- Small research grants emerged as a central mechanism for localizing capacity building during the evaluation period. EEPSEA organizes an in-country environmental economics training course, taught by local experts (mainly the director, senior economists, and other alumni). Upon completion of the course, participants are invited to submit proposals for small-scale projects. Recipients are advised by the senior economists and the director.

There were three sets of small research grants during the evaluation period, with one each in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Lao PDR. The grants in Vietnam were targeted at university lecturers. The grants in Cambodia and Lao PDR were aimed primarily at researchers outside of academia, to strengthen connections to policy channels and to help build capacity in EEPSEA's partners in those countries.

- The director and the senior economists also served as advisors on the climate-change case studies and were responsible for the preparatory sessions at the biannual workshops. They, along with EEPSEA alumni, were lead instructors for many training courses in addition to those linked to the small research grants.

3.2 Increased programming in Vietnam, Cambodia and Lao PDR

EEPSEA intended to expand its programming in Vietnam, Cambodia and Lao PDR in this prospectus period. These three countries were three of the four countries with the largest increase in number of projects between 2000-4 and 2005-8. (The other was Indonesia.) EEPSEA also conducted more country-specific activities in these three countries than elsewhere, including not only general environmental economics courses but also specialized courses, courses for policymakers and NGOs, and, in Cambodia, a seminar series on environmental economics and policy.

- EEPSEA and environmental economics were already well-established in Vietnam before 2005. They are now even better established. The Vietnamese Environmental Economics Association, which EEPSEA helped establish, is evidently thriving, and environmental economics is now a compulsory course for undergraduate economics degrees. One way that EEPSEA worked to enhance its policy influence in Vietnam was through the climate-change case studies, most of which focused on Vietnam.
- Although EEPSEA continues to face challenges in Cambodia and Lao PDR, it increased its impact in both countries, especially Lao PDR. The progress owes much to close relationships that EEPSEA developed with an independent think-tank, the Cambodia Development Research Institute (CDRI) and an influential part of the government's Water Resources and Environment Administration in Lao PDR, the Environmental Research Institute (ERI). Ironically, EEPSEA's success in developing local economists' skills contributed to its greatest challenge: individuals moving out of environmental economics research into other fields or out of research altogether. The supply of Cambodians with economic analysis skills is small, and demand by the many international organizations located in Phnom Penh is high.
- EEPSEA appears to have greater momentum in Lao PDR than in Cambodia. All of its projects in Lao PDR were small research grants, and most were conducted by ERI researchers. The performance of the ERI researchers was impressive, considering their inexperience: they were fresh out of undergraduate programs. EEPSEA is exploring additional activities with local universities.

3.3 Improved quality of research

Publication in peer-reviewed outlets is the best available measure of research quality. Expressed per year, the total number of external publications during 2005-8 (10.3) was slightly greater than during the previous evaluation period (9.8), as were the numbers of total peer-reviewed journal articles (6.3 versus 5.8) and peer-reviewed international journal articles (5.3 versus 4.2). Other findings on research quality include:

- An e-mail survey of EEPSEA researchers revealed that about two-thirds already had an external publication from their projects in press or in print. More than half had a publication accepted at a peer-reviewed journal, and nearly half had one accepted at a peer-reviewed international journal. For most of the latter, the publication was their first one in an international journal, which suggests that EEPSEA is playing an especially important role in helping researchers publish internationally. Publications in the most competitive outlets were generally by individuals who had received a prior EEPSEA grant.
- Researchers reported that, more than other funding sources, EEPSEA provides a uniquely valuable opportunity for them to do high-quality research that can advance their careers. All stated that EEPSEA is qualitatively different from other funding sources due to the freedom it gives them to pursue their own ideas and the advising it provides as they conduct their research. The more narrowly targeted projects that are typically commissioned by bilateral and multilateral organizations reportedly don't allow as much time to do quality work and don't provide the same access to expert advice.
- Evaluations from biannual workshops indicated that researchers were highly satisfied with the project cycle, with the highest ratings reserved for the helpfulness and efficiency of the EEPSEA secretariat and for the quality of advising by resource persons, including the current and former directors.
- The quality of research generated by the small research grants was more mixed. This is to be expected, as the grantees were less experienced and the purpose of the grants was more purely capacity-building.

3.4 Policy influence

EEPSEA projects achieved notable policy influence during 2005-8. This is true not only if one adopts IDRC's expansive definition of policy influence but also if one considers just its most stringent definition, affecting policy regimes, which refers to a direct impact on "the development of laws, regulations, programs, or structures." EEPSEA's annual reports for 2004/05 to 2007/08 report examples of expanding policy capacities, broadening policy horizons and affecting policy regimes. The average annual number of examples across all categories was roughly half the annual number of EEPSEA regular research grants, which is a substantial increase over the fraction reported in the 2000-4 evaluation report, which was one fifth. Reasons for EEPSEA's success include:

- Every EEPSEA researcher interviewed stated that EEPSEA clearly communicates its emphasis on research that influences policy. EEPSEA tailors its guidance on policy influence to each researcher's project.
- EEPSEA helped researchers better understand and exploit the pathways by which research can influence policy through lectures and specialized courses.
- EEPSEA attempted to increase the policy community's understanding of and demand for environmental economics research by organizing special seminar series and courses aimed at policymakers and NGOs. It also worked closely with policy-oriented organizations, and supported environmental economics networks that included both researchers and policymakers among their members.
- Although environmental issues tend not to be the highest priority of governments in the region, they have become higher profile thanks to rising public concern about persistent pollution and resource degradation problems and global attention to climate change.

3.5 Development of new courses

EEPSEA offered its flagship regional environmental economics course twice during the evaluation period and nearly 20 other courses targeted at specific countries or specific topics. The latter covered topics ranging from pollution control, water and sanitation planning and policy, forest policy, contingent valuation, and survey method errors, to the use of environmental economics in policy analysis, fund-raising for research, and effective writing. Many were new courses, a number of which targeted policymakers and NGOs. Ratings on course evaluation forms tended to be higher for international instructors, although most ratings for local instructors were respectable and were sometimes comparable to those for international instructors. Ratings for local instructors tended to be higher for individuals with closer relationships to EEPSEA.

Cross-country activities and relationships

Despite efforts by EEPSEA and other organizations, the number of environmental economists in most countries in Southeast Asia remains very small. This underscores the importance of connecting researchers across countries and to regional and international organizations. The biannual workshops and regional training courses are regular ways of doing this, but EEPSEA pursued other ways too.

- EEPSEA supported its first cross-country valuation study on endangered species conservation. Researchers involved were from China, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. The study is one of the few cross-country valuation studies ever conducted in the developing world.
- The small research grants and climate-change case studies specifically promoted interaction across countries, through advising and workshops. EEPSEA is now developing a cross-country research program on climate change adaptive capacity.
- EEPSEA collaborated with international and regional organizations in implementing several training courses and workshops.

- EEPSEA produced publications that synthesized cross-country information across related projects and offered conclusions of regional and international value, including on biodiversity valuation, management of protected areas, and climate change adaptation. A similar publication on pollution control is in preparation.

4. Issues for Consideration

The main concern identified by this evaluation is a backlog of EEPSEA's own publications, specifically its Research Reports and Policy Briefs. Due to this backlog, the average annual number of Research Reports during 2005-2007 was only about two-thirds of the number during 2000-4 (6.3 vs. 9). As of mid-July 2008, however, the secretariat was working on 10 additional Research Reports. If those reports are all issued during 2008, then the average annual number during 2005-8 will be about the same as during 2000-4. The decline thus is not a reduction in research output but indeed a backlog.

To ensure that EEPSEA is able to publish the results of its projects in a timely manner in the future, EEPSEA's dissemination budget needs to be augmented to enable it to hire more technical reviewers/editors and more copy editors.

Other recommendations include:

- If scheduling permits, invite recipients of small research grants to a biannual workshop before they are very far along with their projects, to enable them to witness the quality of research that their peers are achieving, to receive advice informally from resource persons and their peers, and to have their horizons broadened by the plenary lectures.
- Consider funding alumni with relevant experience to relocate temporarily to Phnom Penh or Vientiane, to provide additional technical support to recipients of small research grants in Cambodia and Lao PDR. Continue exploring ways to strengthen connections with local universities in the two countries and to fund fieldwork by students studying abroad.
- Consider creating a mechanism—a kind of research “clinic”—whereby selected researchers who have reached their limit of three EEPSEA grants could attend biannual workshops and receive advice from the secretariat, resource persons, and peers on externally funded proposals and projects.
- Continue to identify opportunities for cross-country projects, while recognizing that they do not necessarily offer economies of scale. Also, continue to produce synthesis publications for researchers and policymakers/practitioners.

List of Acronyms

CDRI	Cambodia Development Research Institute
EEPSEA	Economy and Environment Program for Southeast Asia
ERI	Environmental Research Institute of Lao PDR
Lao PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic